

DDCI STATEMENT FOR

HOUSE EDUCATION AND LABOR COMMITTEE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Language Capability in the Intelligence Community

15 July 1981

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: Good Morning.

Let me begin by thanking you for giving me this opportunity to express my views on the need for increased Federal assistance in developing our nation's foreign language capability. This subject is of great interest to me personally and of particular relevance to my position as Deputy Director of Central Intelligence. For some time now I have believed that our nation's foreign language capability has been rapidly deteriorating. One of the most obvious results of this deterioration is the adverse impact it is having in the Intelligence Community.

The importance of adequate foreign language capability in the Intelligence Community cannot be overstated. The development of technical intelligence systems in recent years has been an enormous boon to us, but it does not obviate the need to enhance our foreign language ability and area expertise as well. Affording our youth the opportunity to learn foreign languages is essential, for our future intelligence officers will come from this cadre.

Foreign language capability within the Intelligence Community can no longer be limited to just the languages of major threat countries. Communist China and the Soviet Union are no longer the only nations on which we must focus. Military and political intelligence are no longer the sole interests of the Intelligence Community. Third World nations now represent an

increasing concern to us. Additionally, the economic, technological, and scientific capabilities of other nations, large and small, demand our concentrated attention. We must keep abreast of developments in all areas. And yet with this increase in demand for our expertise has come a decline in our foreign language capability. Now more than ever we must be able to translate and assimilate a vast amount of information as fast as possible in order to effectively and correctly analyze it and provide good input to our country's foreign policy makers.

There are other areas in which the Intelligence Community relies on strong language capability. Human source collection, through which we gather some of our most significant intelligence information, is one. Foreign language ability is critical to developing strong ties with our counterparts in other intelligence services and with the agents who report to us. The collection of human intelligence is something of an art. The success of our officers overseas depends to a very large extent on intangible psychological and human factors, on feelings of trust and confidence, and on personal rapport. Speaking the other person's language plays a critical role in this chemistry. Minimum level competence in a foreign language is just not good enough. Our intelligence officers must be as highly skilled in the language as they are in the other facets of their jobs.

The Intelligence Community relies heavily on foreign language skills in its exploitation of open source literature. Although the amount of intelligence information available to us in our own language is enormous, the quantum of published information in foreign languages which is unexploited or unexploitable is also great. There is a vast amount of scientific and technical information

published in foreign language journals throughout the world from which we are able to glean an enormous amount of intelligence. The same holds true for the array of foreign language newspapers and media broadcasts. Currently, however, we must often rely on secondary rather than primary sources in research. Due to manpower restraints and a shortage of qualified linguists, we contract for a great deal of translation work. As you might imagine, the value of the intelligence derived from this translation is sometimes limited because of the accuracy of the translation and its timeliness.

We are obviously not able to contract out all the material we have to read and assimilate. There is a great deal of information which is so highly classified that we must depend on in-house expertise. Even if we could contract it out, our intelligence analysts would still need to be fluent in a foreign language in order for the CIA to fulfill its mission. It is not sufficient to merely report events. We must understand the culture and society in which the event takes place. The more subtle changes in a society are often lost to the individual who cannot converse or read in the language of the country.

We are particularly dependent on strong language skills in the economic reporting sphere. For some important intelligence targets statistical data are rarely published in English. In some cases the investment plans of foreign industries are published in English, but the financial data necessary to gauge the ability of an industry to carry out the plan is published only in the foreign language. Translation services, whether federally funded or not, generally cover only highlights of the economic news. Only by reading the full

range of material available does one discover some of the more detailed information on an industry's operations that is important to our analysis of a country's economic activities.

The importance of good language skills to the work of the Intelligence Community became readily apparent last year. In order to better understand the Ayatollah Khomeini, we have had to translate many of his own written works. Currently, we are reading and analyzing Soviet newspapers published in areas near Afghanistan so that we can better understand the reaction in those areas to the events in Afghanistan. Foreign language fluency has proven to be especially important in the interrogation of defectors and emigres. Over the years, we have been fortunate enough to glean a great deal of intelligence information from such individuals, most recently during the Cuban refugee situation. Despite these successes, we can still use more skilled linguists.

I am sure that throughout these hearings you will be deluged by a mass of statistics on the nation's current foreign language capabilities. Unfortunately, I am limited in what I can say in open session about the statistical effect declining foreign language ability has had on our operations. Suffice it to say that we have been impacted severely. Although we have a great many analysts and intelligence officers who have some foreign language ability, many do not have the professional level of competence needed to conduct their jobs, and the language capability which they do have is not necessarily in their primary area of expertise. In the Operations area, we are now losing many of our most experienced people who have had 20 or so years of service using a second and third language. Replacement of these people has been made difficult by the fact that many universities and colleges no longer have foreign language

requirements as part of their mandatory curriculum. Moreover, as a result of the discontinuation of the military draft, we have had fewer non-career military personnel with language training to draw upon. We need to be able to recruit and hire people who already possess capability in a foreign language and not be burdened by having to train them in this skill after they are on board. An intelligence officer's duties, whether he or she is destined for analytical or clandestine tasks, require a multifaceted training program that involves more than just language training. Total immersion instruction and in-country training in a language are not always feasible. More often than not, due to operational necessity, the officer must be pulled from training and sent on assignment. We simply cannot afford the burden in terms of time, expense, security, and manpower to continually devote the bulk of a person's training period to the development of a language skill.

We are especially vulnerable when it comes to the more exotic languages such as Urdu, Arabic, Farsi, etc. We have seen a steady decline since 1975 in almost all languages, including the more common Romance languages. Although for many years we have been concerned with more than proficiency in Chinese and Russian, our primary intelligence target was the Communist World. Now that the priorities in intelligence work have expanded to include much more than this area, we must be prepared linguistically as well as operationally and analytically for any development throughout the world, whether it be political, economic, military, technological, or scientific. Consequently, we need strong skills in most world languages. Let me hasten to add that proficiency in a language does not necessarily mean competence in the myriad of dialects of the language. For example, an intelligence officer may be skilled in the Arabic

spoken in Syria but almost totally deficient in the tribal dialects of the Gulf.

The Intelligence Community has long recognized the need to improve linguistic skills. We have frequently turned to outside sources in the academic world and in other Government programs for translation assistance. We have also implemented many of our own programs to develop strong language skills in-house. The Intelligence Community has an Ad Hoc Committee on the Linguists Problem which acts as a central point of reference for those elements of the Intelligence Community which are concerned with the hiring and retention of operational and analytic personnel requiring a foreign language in their area of expertise. Each of the principal National Foreign Intelligence Board organizations concerned--CIA, DoD, and NSA--have specialized requirements and operate under different personnel management and career development systems, and it is thus impossible to devise any system which would be applicable to all of the National Foreign Intelligence Board members requiring language-qualified personnel. The Committee is effective nonetheless in ensuring that solutions to common problems adopted by one organization are made known to others and, where possible, adopted by them as well. Much effort has been given to ensuring that the independent programs of the various agencies are complementary and not competitive or redundant in nature. Within CIA itself, we have in the last few years implemented a Language Incentive Program whereby personnel are rewarded for achieving a particular level of proficiency in various foreign languages and rewarded for the maintenance of that skill. In addition, efforts have been made to allow analysts to rise to higher GS levels without changing their career tracks to management. This latter program

gives many of our fine language-skilled analysts the opportunity to retain their proficiency and to continue serving the Intelligence Community in the area in which they are best qualified. We also try to schedule as many language-qualified people as possible for overseas travel so that they may have the opportunity to both use their language skills and learn more about the countries in which the language is spoken.

Aside from our own programs, the Director and I strongly support the recommendations contained in the report of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies issued in November 1979--The Perkins Commission Report. Regardless of the position one takes on the Commission's findings and recommendations, the report accurately summarizes the importance foreign languages play in our ability to correctly assess world events and provide our nation's leaders with timely, well researched, and well analyzed information from which they can shape our national policy. The Director and I also encourage adequate funding for such programs as the Department of Education's International Education and Foreign Language Studies-Domestic Program and the Translations Program of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Humanities Endowment Translations Program provides significant support to the Intelligence Community through translations that contribute to an understanding of the history and intellectual achievements of other cultures. They have or are conducting such useful studies as those dealing with Islamic legal practices, Hindu legal text, and the Bakhtiyari Tribal Confederation of Iran.

Let me close by restating my concern that the foreign language capability of our country is poor and is getting worse. This nation suffers from the fact



that we are a country in which a second language is unnecessary to do business on a daily basis except in certain unique areas. We are losing the large talent bank of second-generation Americans where another language was spoken at home, and we must remember that we are one of the few nations in the world which is not a truly bilingual society. Although we may have laughed at the well publicized gaffes that have occurred in recent years because of the lack of complete fluency or understanding of a foreign language, when it comes to intelligence information, such blunders simply cannot be permitted. Decisive action should be taken on the Federal level to improve foreign language training in the U.S. so that we can head off the problems we will face in future years if our foreign language capability continues on its current downward path.